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Preacher or Actor: The Dramatic Role of Puritan Sermons in America

by Beth Robbins

Beth Robbins is currently a senior double major in Elementary Education and English from Holden, MA. She wrote the paper for Ann Brunjes's Early American Literature Class in Spring 2004. Following graduation she plans to teach overseas before pursuing graduate work in ESL. The paper came to be because Dr. Brunjes both made the Puritans intriguing and seemed sure noone else would be so interested in studying them.

The Puritans settled into Massachusetts Bay in 1630 under John Winthrop in response to religious restrictions presented to them in England. While they did not necessarily intend to break away from the Church of England, the distance between these New Englanders and their original church affiliations could reap no other result. They retained their Calvinist beliefs in the power of God to save the "elect" and eternally damn others, and they dedicated their lives to working towards achieving a state of grace with God. These founding settlers set the standard for future generations. John Winthrop described America as a "city upon a hill," since many people in England believed that the Puritans, and all those who fled England, would fail in America and were watching the new communities closely. Ever mindful of England's constantly scrutinizing eye, the Puritans would strive for nothing short of excellence. Conversion to Christianity and a life dedicated to proclaiming the works of God became the heart and soul of Puritan doctrine, and elaborating these principles throughout two generations were ministers such as Thomas Hooker, Increase Mather, and Jonathan Edwards. The words of these three men vibrated in the hearts of their congregations from

the early seventeenth century and through the better part of the eighteenth century, and the terrifying dramatic presentation of these exquisitely crafted sermons still provokes questions of morality and faith in contemporary readers. These evangelical preachers used their religious outlet of sermons to not only preach the word of God, but also to assert their own intellect, wit, and learning, which have cemented their place in American sentimental literature.

Thomas Hooker was born in 1586 in Leistershire, England. He was educated at Queen's College in Cambridge, and entered the teaching profession as a minister. However, despite his estimable reputation as a minister, Hooker was forced into early retirement for being "one of the most conspicuous leaders of Puritan sentiment in the land" (Miller 290). In England, his strict Puritan teachings posed a threat to the established Anglican Church and, in effect, to the government as well. So he took his Puritan ideals to New England, where he proved himself to be one of Connecticut's most eloquent preachers (Miller 290). Though his style and theories were not embraced by the Anglican Church, Hooker was able to express his arguments to the more accepting New England congregations as the Puritan movement waved across the New World.

At the conclusion of Hooker's career, more and more ministers of the Puritan world were grasping the opportunity to use their place at the pulpit to move the hearts and minds of congregations. Increase Mather was one such minister. A second generation New Englander and minister, Mather had humbler beginnings than his British-born predecessors. Mather received a free education in Boston and attended Harvard in 1651. He managed to travel to England to study and practice the ministry from 1656 to 1661, but he returned to America to teach at Second Church. Even though Mather's ministry was met with opposing policies and previously misled citizens, he persevered in gaining both political and religious influence by strictly directing the daily routines of his followers in the ways of Puritan founders. His commanding presence and confident preaching earned him the trust of the community, thus reinforcing his authority.

As the Great Awakening dawned at the turn of the century, conventional preachers were replaced with scientific theorists and Enlightenment ideals. One of the last attempts at a Puritan contingency came from Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was born in 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut, the only male child of eleven. He was a third generation minister, the grandson of Solomon Stoddard, one of the most influential and independent Puritan ministers of Northampton (Baym 464). Edwards studied at home and at Yale College, where he focused his studies on theology. He discovered a deep love of religious theories, and longed to share his recognition of the importance of religious commitment with the public. Edwards "managed to tend to his duties as pastor or a growing congregation and deliver brilliant sermons, to write some of his most important books…and watch his eleven children grown up" (Baym 465). While skillfully balancing his home life and religious career, he was also able to adapt to the changing needs of his congregation. With the dawn of the Great Awakening, Edwards was finally able to fully proclaim the need of the people to return to the conventional authority of the church. Ironically, however, his preaching methods were far from conventional. While he believed the church was the complete authority in a community, he used non-traditional, dictating styles of preaching to deliver this message.

Hooker, Mather, and Edwards both embody and contrast the Puritan beliefs. While their words and messages are contracted directly from the Bible, their actions and deliverances are less than pure. These

men were undoubtedly well-educated and devout Christians. They believed in the word of God so strongly they could think of nothing else. However, conventional methods of conveying this unprecedented faith were not the most effective. The sermonists' compulsion to enforce conversion is what led to the creation of their religious literature. Their resulting sermons were a combination of literary genius, manipulative tact, dramatic effect, Scriptural references, and fanatical Christian beliefs. They were terrifyingly effective not only in their own time, but long after Puritanism had receded in America. The sermons overflow with the authors' emotional struggles to influence the masses of the truth, and this emotion removes the sermons from purely religious texts and places them instead into sentimental American literature.

Though the Puritan beliefs were increasingly questioned, "the transformative impulse within Puritanism had its clearest manifestation in the pulpit, for the printed Word erupted through the existing social order only when given voice by Puritan ministers" (Gustafson 15). All three sermonists depict the practices and religious movements of their respective times. Their importance as ministers of the word of God was manifested almost entirely in their abilities to interpret that word for their congregations. They share certain fundamental stylistic elements in their sermons that remain stable regardless of changing times and attitudes. One of these elements is the authoritative dominating figure each preacher presented himself to be. The sermonists, while they lived among their congregations, were not entirely humbled by their own messages. They were well-educated in prime English and American schools and universities, and they were well aware of the influence such a luxury had. By asserting the word of God in a dominating and dictating manner, these men created nearly infallible positions of authority for themselves in their communities. They considered themselves successful by the size and response of their following rather than the convictions in the hearts of the people. So, while they claimed to preach the word of God in such a way as to benefit the people, the material remuneration of a position of authority were also no less appealing to these Christian men than to any other community leader.

In an attempt to prove the validity of his beliefs to his congregation, Thomas Hooker preached in a powerful and dominating manner. Thus, he was considered a "virtual dictator" during his time in Connecticut. In his sermon "Meditation," Hooker maintains that Christians must devote all thought to sinful acts they have committed and to the greatness of God, so that they can fully experience the truth in salvation. He describes the way to Providence "by serious meditation" and he instructs his constituents to "look back to the lineage and pedigree of our lusts, and track the abominations of our lives, step by step, until we come to the very nest where they are hatched and bred" (Hooker 303). In this way, he constantly reminds his congregation of the way to salvation.

Increase Mather also used a physically dominating style of preaching to enforce his authority in the community. He was considered to be a "commanding figure" (Miller 335). He held his position in the ministry in the highest esteem, and enforced this in his sermons by constantly reaffirming his own authority in the church. In his "Sleeping at Sermons," Mather exerts the importance of listening to what he offers during his sermons: "As for sleeping at sermons, some look upon it as no sins; others account it a peccadillo, a sin not worth taking notice of, or of troubling themselves about. By my text shewest that danger and death is in it" (Mather 349). Mather reminds his followers that without his guidance and explanation of

the truth, they will often underestimate the magnitude of their actions and thus expose themselves to the severity of God. His sermons reflect his deep emotional attachment to the word of God, and his extreme need to bring his congregation to the same understanding he had discovered.

Most likely the most terrifying example of the true authoritative fashion is Jonathan Edwards. The most prominent example of his dominating preaching style is his renowned "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards was very concerned with guiding his congregation down the right path: "Focusing attention on his precisely articulated word; Edwards invested his oral performances with textual authority" (Gustafson 62). He emphasizes that without completely recognizing God's authority, "every unconverted man properly belongs to hell" (Edwards 500). In this way he portrays himself as the most knowledgeable of the way to salvation and therefore the only model authority for his congregation to follow.

In addition to asserting authority through physical domination of the pulpit, preachers relied heavily on Scriptural references to validate their messages and their power in society. Audiences were familiar with the Bible and were more apt to relate to the preacher's words and understand his message if it originated in the Bible. Thomas Hooker "granted the pulpit orator greater authority with his congregation and greater control over Scripture" (Gustafson 23) with an outward display of Scriptural knowledge. Within just a few sentences of "Meditation," Hooker quotes Josiah: "thou shalt not suffer the word to depart out of thy mind, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night" (Hooker 301). For each point he makes, Hooker is sure to follow with at least two direct Scriptural quotes. In this way, he is able to connect the intangible concept of complete dedication of the mind to a familiar, physical, and public entity: the Bible. Puritan ministers believed that as orators they were simply allowing the Lord to work through them, but this "extemporaneous ideal required the speaker to inhabit Scripture fully and personally experience its meaning…creating an authenticity effect of divine inspiration through voice, gesture, emotional display, and spontaneous interactions with the audience" (Gustafson 47). In other words, Puritans believed that the written word of God could not be fully grasped and understood without the interpretive preaching of an ordained minister. This belief was extremely advantageous for sermonists of that time, as they were seen as the sole connection between God and the public, thus to question them was to question the Lord.

Increase Mather took on the role of spiritual medium as well. His plain and solid style was coated with Scriptural references to remind his congregation that his ideas were not independently generated, but were rather grounded in the word of God. Mather was thus able to maintain credibility and authority beyond public doubt because of the community's intense reliance on and belief in the Bible. As he describes the dangers of taking small sins for granted, he states, "We have solemn instances in the Scripture, concerning those that have lost their lives, because they have been guilty of such miscarriages, as carnal reason will say are but little sins" (Mather 349). He then follows this with multiple explicit biblical references. Similarly, Edwards bases the topic of his entire sermon on a biblical passage: "Their foot shall slide in due time" (Dt. 32.35), and then he proceeds to cite not only supporting passages from the Bible, but also from the history of the church. By supporting their sermons with constant references to the written word, Hooker, Mather, and Edwards emphasize the belief that they are only tools through which the spirit of God works. As such "tools," preachers eliminated

the accusations of personal gain in their high society positions. They were seen as appointed by God, similar to the prophets, and thus as truly working for the overall good of the people, not ever for their own personal advancements.

However, even multiple biblical references were not necessarily plain and coherent enough for full congregational understanding. Since many preachers' audiences lacked in education, similes, metaphors, and illustrations from their daily routines were often used to enhance the intended message. In this way, "Puritans sought to move their listeners beyond passive acceptance of orthodox dogma to active engagement with the meaning of Scripture" (Breymer 3). Edwards is a prime example of this: he wanted his congregation to not just understand the doctrine, but to be spiritually moved by what they believe in. For Edwards, in order to aid this experience, he needed to break down his original theme into its most basic elements, listing the consequences of not recognizing God's miracles, the validity of God's omniscient power, and the application of this teaching to one's daily life. Edwards addresses his entire sermon directly at his congregation, accusing them outright of denying God's power in order to bring his concept into a very real and personal light. In his "Application" of his sermon, he condemns their ignorance: "You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but you do not see the hand of God in it" (Edwards 503). He then describes the consequences of this ignorance in a way they can relate to and visualize: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on a string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the pleasure of God, and that of an angry God…that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood" (Edwards 504). The image of a bow and arrow constantly pointed at one's heart is one that Edwards' congregations could easily visualize. Francis Breymer states, "It was not enough to simply recall Christ's sacrificial drama; it had to be visualized, witnessed over again, even in its goriest details" (Breymer 5). Over and over, list by list, Edwards repeats the notions of the wrath of an eternal and angry God until the image of man dangling over the fiery pit of hell is emblazoned on the hearts and minds of his listeners. Edwards uses eloquence and descriptive language to establish himself as a credible source of God's words. He establishes himself as merely a tool of the Scripture, thus his credibility as a leader remains untouched. He is able to maintain the authority because people are afraid to question the possibility that he may be wrong. In their eyes, such an act would be considered blasphemous: an act against God.

Hooker and Mather also use similes and repetition in their sermons in order to provide clarity for their congregations. Hooker chooses similes to avoid any possibilities of misunderstanding in his congregation. He compares meditation to the life of a goldsmith, to the absorbed water of a root which "loosens the weeds and thorns, which they may be plucked up easily" (Hooker 304). In this short sermon, Hooker states and restates the importance of his message in many ways. However, this not only aids his congregation's understanding, it also gives him an increased air of authority. He has earned such an understanding for himself as to offer so many variations on a single theme for others. Mather's approach is observed as somewhat more worldly, as he does not just accuse those sitting (and sleeping) before him, but also the general nature of man. He does not use Edwards' style of accusation, nor does he flower his message with similes and metaphors. Instead, he lectures on a topic of familiar to most parishioners and uses its universality to open the eyes of his listeners to the dangers

surrounding them. He almost justifies their sinful actions to put his congregation at ease: "We may here take notice that the nature of man is woefully corrupted and depraved, else they would not be so apt to sleep when the precious Truths of God are dispensed" (Mather 348). Then Mather reminds them that it is their responsibility to recognize this fault, and avoid its consequences at all costs. He gives his congregation enough hope to change their ways, but also enough fear of God to listen to and completely trust his words.

Regardless of what the preacher's message or original intent was, their delivery of this message was a completely separate entity: "There is no doubt that the preachers adopted a plain style, but the designation referred to content, not delivery" (Breymer 3). In this way, Puritan ministers often used non-traditional styles and elements in order to awaken their parishioners to a sense of righteousness and obedience. Since "ministers could verify the truth of their interpretation only in its effect on their congregation, its success in converting listeners" (Gustafson 19), preachers were often pushed to extreme dramatic attempts to ensure that success. For Hooker, the sermon performance threatened their congregations. These threats were aimed directly at listeners in consequence for their actions or lack thereof. "The Puritan minister could console the saint with the message of Christ's love or he could provide the strong psychic of terror needed for the corrupt heart" (Breymer 5). Most prominent in threatening sermons is Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Not only does he attack and accuse his parishioners, he tells them they deserve at any moment to be cast into the pits of hell:

> It is true that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the flood of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing…If God should only withdraw His hand from the floodgate; it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come up on you with omnipotent power (Edwards 503).

Edwards speaks of an angry God who "abhors" men whose "eternal wrath" is "inconceivable" and "terrible." Key words and gestures such as these were meant to frighten and terrify congregations into conversion and complete dedication of the soul. "If creating the verbal effect was part of Edwards' rhetorical skill, equally important was his ability to stir powerful emotions in his audiences" (Gustafson 65). The emotional response of congregations was the gauge of a successful sermon, and Edwards and his predecessors were master manipulators of this tool.

Ironically, as powerful and authoritative as these preachers and their sermons were due to their dramatic style, Puritans avidly opposed drama and theater. The "Puritan reputation for a so-called 'plain style' of preaching, their public condemnation of the theatre, and the allegedly subdued nature of their demeanor in general" (Breymer 5) posed a confusing contradiction with Puritan sermon style. Based on the written records of the actual texts and reports of witnesses of such behavior, it has been proven that dramatic style was an imperative element in Puritan preaching. Hooker explained his performances of "fire in the pulpit" as "a reflection of the fire of faith in the preacher" (Breymer 5). In other words, the justification for any dramatic outbursts by ministers was the supposed divine intervention of God which guided the sermons. This style was effective for a limited time in America. Each minister had a unique style that was embodied and imitated by others, but each faded away as the interests of the audiences changed. Hooker was forced into early retirement in England for his conspicuous

preaching habits, but he was welcomed with enthusiasm in early seventeenth century America. He was a sternly orthodox preacher until his death in 1647, and while his sermons were dominating and commanded authority, Hooker did not lose his enthusiastic audience during his lifetime.

Increase Mather entered the ministry in the mid to late seventeenth century, and was highly esteemed until his return from England at the turn of the century. Though he was never overthrown as a minister, his power did lose momentum towards the end of his career. However, "he remained a commanding figure…maintaining the principles of the founders to the last ditch, and yet moving with the times on at least some important questions" (Miller 335). Jonathan Edwards, on the other hand, lost much credibility when he increased his radical style in order to restore the church's authority. He began his career at a prime time, in the early eighteenth century, and for about fifteen years the public response was in his favor. But in his later years his people were "tired of religious controversy and the hysterical behavior of a few fanatics turned them against the spirit of revivalism" (Baym 465). For Edwards, the religious resurgence had come to an end, and his fanatical enthusiasm for the power of the church overstayed its welcome and eventually lost the support of the people. So, in essence, the effect of Edwards' sermons meant to inspire lost momentum as he increased the dramatics. Breymer remarks, "It was when the drama of the performance directed the audience to the truth of the message that God worked his will on the souls of those he had chosen" (Breymer 5), and for Edwards, God was no longer intervening in his favor.

One question remains to be explored in conclusion to the investigation of the true intentions and stylistic modes of the Puritan sermons: Why have they survived the test of time, and why do they still cause readers to shudder and even, on some level, question their own virtues and faith? The answer to that question lies in part in the inspiration of the original fervor of the ministers, but more so in the basic elements of the sermons themselves. The Bible has changed very little since it has come into existence, and for many Christians it is the physical core and foundation of faith and religion. For this reason, biblical references used as explanations in the sermons have become the pillars which support the validity of these sermons. As much as scholars can study the intentions of the ministers and dissect the dramatic exaggerations of their orations, readers are still left with the original intended message which begs for personal ownership, understanding, and acceptance. In this way, Thomas Hooker, Increase Mather, and Jonathan Edwards were successful in their endeavors to force their audiences, throughout time, to look at themselves through the critical eyes of God and reevaluate their virtues and morality under this new light. The emotional undertones of the sermons are what draw the line between purely religious sermons and sentimental literature. Since the sermons have become a source of study for generations and are still as effective as when they were originally delivered, they have also become classics in the literary world. Their unique combination of influential writing and dramatic effect has left little room for creative interpretation of a message; it is clear for all readers. However, the combination of both literature and drama are necessary for the full emphasis intended to be portrayed. In this way, Hooker, Mather, and Edwards not only broke down traditional barriers as religious fanatics, but were literary pioneers as well.

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